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AUTHOR Hugenberg, Lawrence W.; Hugenberg, Barbara S.
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ABSTRACT

Corporate communication trainers, consultants, and professional organizations develop programs to enhance communication skills for managers and supervisors with their employees. This paper proposes an argument for a communication training program that addresses the future organizational skill needs for middle managers. The paper states that this training program does not focus on the communication skills needed to communicate with employees, but it recognizes that middle managers are between a rock (upper management) and a hard place (employees) in the organization. It proposes training middle managers on how to manage conflict, guide effective organizational group decisions, and take a negotiation approach to communication in organizational groups with supervisors and subordinates. The paper develops the theme that there are appropriate and inappropriate skills for communicating and working in organizational groups with members of upper management and employees. According to the paper, this training program integrates modern theories of organizational behavior and organizational culture to help the middle manager survive in that difficult spot between upper management and employees. Contains 15 references. (NKA)

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Training for Middle Management:
Communication Between A Rock and A Hard Place

Lawrence W. Hugenberg

Youngstown State University

and

Barbara S. Hugenberg

Bowling Green State University

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Corporate communication trainers, consultants, and professional organizations develop programs to enhance communication skills for managers and supervisors with their employees. These same individuals and organizations develop communication training programs to enhance employee skills in communicating with each other. These training programs recognize the importance of top-down communication, bottom-up communication, and effective communication within the bottom subunits of the organization. Training programs typically recognize the individual worker working her or his way up the organizational ladder and train them to be good organizational "citizens".

Hugenberg and Moyer (1996) argued that communication skill training should be executed within work groups so everyone is trained at the same time and with the same skills. Although a step in the right direction to developing more effective communication skills in organizations, their proposal is only one piece of a larger puzzle.

This article proposes an argument for a communication training program that addresses the future organizational skill needs for middle managers. This training program does not focus on the communication skills needed to communicate with employees, but it recognizes that middle managers are between a rock (upper management) and a hard place (employees) in the organization. We propose training middle managers on how to manage conflict, guide

effective organizational group decisions, and take a negotiation approach to communication in organizational groups with supervisors and subordinates. Because employees are being asked to assume a more entrepreneurial spirit in their work and because middle managers bear the major responsibility for organizational effectiveness, this training program is, in our experience, essential.

This article develops the theme that there are appropriate and inappropriate skills for communicating and working in organizational groups with members of upper management and employees. Middle managers, although decreasing in numbers in most organizations, need more communication skills and more effective alternatives for being a facilitator of effective organizational group effectiveness. As we all recognize, middle managers remain the bearer of information from upper management to employees. This is an expected role; and is one that will remain the focus of middle management communication. However, the expectations of employees have altered this one-way communication system because employees want to be heard in the organization. Middle managers are becoming the conduit of upward communication in organizations. This dual communication role does not just happen. It requires specific skill and training.

This training program integrates modern theories of organizational behavior and organizational culture to help the middle manager survive in that spot we identify in the organization as "between a rock and a hard place" -- directly

between upper management and the employees. This training program will make middle managers more adaptive to the demands of communication change in organizations resulting from new technologies, new upper management, and a less skilled work force.

The Problem

Although all of this communication training is good, in a sense it creates a false sense of communicative security. Corporate officials "pat themselves on the back" because they run members of middle management and supervisors through communication training programs that focus on communicating with their employees. Deal and Kennedy (1982) pointed out the role of middle management in organizations when they wrote, "Middle management exists today, in large part, to carry communications from the top management of a company to its workers. ... Middle management is a creation of the twentieth-century organizational life; fortunately for all of us, it is an obsolete profession, at least in its present form" (p. 186). Yet, much skill training in organizations focuses on that top-down communication system that contemporary organizational theorists believe to be less important than bottom-up communication. We are concerned with the convergence of this communication -- the organizational group with members of upper management and employees. If we are to believe in these contemporary theories of organizations, then we

must change the way we train middle management and supervisors for the modern and future organization - the organization of today and tomorrow.

Business leaders mouth all the appropriate buzz-words ("entrepreneurship," "participatory management," "self-determination," "work teams", etc.). The problem remains that the communication skills training in most organizations does not prepare middle management to operate in a corporate culture that tries to function in the 1990s, much less the 21st century, but still uses many of the communication styles effective in the 1950s. Deal and Kennedy (1982) summarized the needed change in the middle management paradigm. They wrote, "... given the increased voice of these workers in day-to-day affairs, [middle] managers will serve as brokers -- to balance the legitimate self-interests of both the workers and the company. ... [middle] managers will be both the bearers of culture as well as its promoters" (p. 189). In the future, middle management will serve an ever-increasing role in organizations. They will serve as the liaison with upper management and the work force in ways that reflect more of a conduit of information than ever before. They need the skills to deal with these new communication roles.

The real problem for mid-management is that they truly are between a rock and a hard place -- between their bosses and their employees. The central skills needed for mid-managers, then, are negotiation skills. They have to be able to negotiate their way through the difficult passages of managing their employees,

managing conflict between and among employees, participating in organizational decision making with their employees and supervisors, and, at the same time, carrying out the tasks given them by their supervisors. Mid-managers need to know how to make decisions in a systematic way, work in groups, and manage conflict. There appears to be little skill training in these areas to prepare the middle manager to be a more effective and competent organizational "citizen". Too often the focus in organizational communication training is in interpersonal communication or interviewing, or in how to prepare and deliver an effective presentation. The real communication skill training for mid-managers will be in the area of helping them through their day-to-day decisions and conflicts. This, then, is the focus of this manuscript.

The Solution:
Learning to Negotiate Through Conflict and Decision Making

One advantage of being a middle manager is they work in organizational groups to make decisions that lead to better organizational decisions. Many organizational groups are mired in gridlock or conflict. Upper management and, sometimes, middle management tell groups what to do and how to do it. The challenges for the middle manager are three-fold. First, the middle manager has to assist the group in making decisions in a dimple, direct, and effective manner. Second, the middle manager

is frequently called upon to help the organizational group manage conflict. And, third, the middle manager has to negotiate her or his role between the supervisors and the employees to be effective.

This article should help shed some light on each of these three challenges facing a middle manager. First, we'll discuss a training approach to decision making, then offer some suggestions on how to manage conflict, and then we will offer some suggestions on how a middle manager can negotiate his or her appropriate role in the organization.

Decision Making

Organizational groups are able to make better decisions if they are able to approach the process with effective communication skills and a systematic decision making process (Leathers, 1972). In this section we are going to examine rule orientation as it relates to organizational group decision making.

Rule Orientation. The first important consideration in organizational decision making groups must be to establish a rule orientation (Beatty, 1989). Rule orientation refers to an organizational member's expectations for success. Rule orientations vary according to the make up of the organizational group. In making decisions, organizational groups with members who have matching rule orientations agree more than those who don't. Therefore, it is important to learn the rule orientations

of your fellow organizational group members before beginning any work together. There are three rule orientations to be aware of:

- **Maximax** - organizational group members expect and are happy with only the best possible decision
- **Maximum** - organizational group members expect and are happy with a pretty good, but not perfect, result of their decision
- **Maximin** - organizational group members expect and are happy with an average result of their decision

The middle manager needs to get a group to decide on one of these rule orientations or will have to manage a lot more conflict down the road in the process of the group attempting to reach a decision in a timely manner.

Phases in Decision Making. Once an organizational group has agreed to a rule orientation (or at least have agreed not to agree on a rule orientation), the group is ready to proceed. The middle manager has to allow time or demand time for the members of the organizational group to get to know each other. Members need time to get to know one another. Middle managers need to begin delegating' responsibilities. Members need time to gather and organize appropriate organizational information. For effective organizational groups, the middle manager needs to make sure there are informal times for members of the group to exchange ideas. Fisher (1970) outlined four, still popular, phases in group decision making, starting with the organizational group's first meeting. He argued that each groups moves through

each of the following phases:

- **Orientation** - organizational group members meet for the first time, establish the group climate and group norms, and seek social positions within the group; members often express agreement and seek clarification of ideas
- **Conflict** - once group members feel comfortable with each other and know one another better, arguments and conflict will usually emerge; group members begin to express their like or dislike for others' ideas; coalitions begin between group members form at this time, and attempts to persuade other members of the organizational group are frequent
- **Emergence** - after some conflict, organizational group members feel pressures to pull together and make a unified decision; conflict and coalitions will begin to disappear, with only limited dissent remaining
- **Reinforcement** - once a decision has been made, organizational group members make comments supporting the decision; a pattern of favorable attitudes and reinforcement of the organizational group's ideas is characteristic in this phase; dissention is rare in this phase

Taken together, these phases represent group interaction from the first meeting to task completion. The goal of the middle manager is to communicate in ways that minimize conflict and gets

organizational members to a reinforcement stage in their communication with each other. Individuals go through these phases along with organizational groups. Groups typically will go through these phases in order; however, individual organizational members might go through these phases in a different sequence. In fact some organizational group members might get "stuck" in the conflict phase. Although all groups go through these phases in one way or another, there is no guarantee that the decisions made will be *good*. In other words, going through these decision making phases does not guarantee a good result. The challenge for middle managers is to keep individual members moving to support of organizational decisions -- especially those decisions communicated down the organizational ladder while at the same time making sure that information is communicated clearly up the ladder if there is conflict.

The next part of this article explores what happens when groups achieve the anticipated results.

Critical Functions in Decision-Making

Organizational groups have only one function: "Get the job done, and done right." But in the group's quest to "get the job done" some groups fail to get it "done right." During the conflict and emergence phases of decision making, organizational group members need to be aware of four critical judgments that contribute to quality decisions (Hirokawa, 1988; Hirokawa & Scheerhorn, 1986). The judgments consist of: [a] proper

assessment of the problem, [b] proper assessment of the requirements for an acceptable choice, [c] proper assessment of the positive qualities of alternative choices, and [d] proper assessment of the negative qualities of alternative choices. Let's take a closer look at each of these important assessments.

Proper assessment of the problem or choice-making situation. Organizational groups need to understand the problem they are deciding or the task they are completing. Members need to discuss its severity and causes in order to determine the best solution. If the organizational group, or at least the middle manager, hasn't properly assessed the problem, it is increasingly likely that an undesired of unexpected solution will be reached. Proper assessment of the problem is extremely important to quality decision making.

Proper assessment of the requirements for an acceptable choice. Another critical function in organizational group decision making is to set *specific*, necessary, and *realistic* goals and objectives. Middle managers must be sure that organizational groups set goals; goals that are realistic, necessary, and specific. No one knows the problems being faced better than the middle managers. They are the closest organizational member to problems.

Proper assessment of the positive qualities of alternative solutions. When the organizational group has narrowed the options to a choice between a few solutions, it is essential each member

and the group as a whole consider the positive qualities of each alternative.

Proper assessment of the negative qualities of alternative solutions. While the organizational group is considering the positive qualities of each alternative, the middle manager must ensure the group considers negative consequences as well. In fact, this is the most important function in separating good from bad decisions made by organizational groups. It's important each member speak out and voice criticisms. When group members fail to criticize one another's ideas, a tendency toward groupthink may result (Janis, 1972). The middle manager must do several things to discourage groupthink and encourage criticism. The middle manager must openly encourage criticism within the group. The middle manager must ask members to wait to discuss their preferences until after discussing all alternatives. The middle manager can assign one other organizational group member to be the devil's advocate -- to intentionally look for fault in the workings of the group. All of these suggestions encourage diversity of thinking and ideas. These debates will lead to better solutions.

Taken together, these four critical functions of organizational group decision making will determine whether the middle manager has "done right." It's not important that these functions be completed in order -- it is important that they are completed; all of them. Most critical, is the assessment of the negative consequences of alternative solutions. In other words,

criticizing group members' ideas is the most important function in decision making. Ironically, it's also the function that people have the most difficulty. People are often reluctant to make negative comments because we fear conflict with others. The middle manager needs to be prepared to encourage conflict through effective communication skills.

Conflict

It's not surprising that when organizational groups make decisions, individual members don't always agree, or even get along with one another. As previously stated, conflict through argument about ideas is the most important function in making a good organizational group decision. But arguments can become hurtful, and create an unbearable climate in the organizational group. This section will discuss skills needed to maintain the balance between constructive and destructive argument (conflict).

Reasons for Conflict

Conflict often begins when organizational group members perceive competing goals. The goals can be task-oriented (decision making, competing for resources, competing for rights), or goals can be relational (achieving influence/power, differences in personality or work style, and even competitiveness). However, conflict about task-oriented goals is

more likely to be discussed within the group than conflict over relational goals.

Unfortunately, it is conflict over relational goals which is rarely confronted in organizations. It tends to escalate more rapidly than other types of conflict. There are several signs that conflict is increasing because of a struggle over relational goals (Conrad, 1985):

- members begin to argue emotionally
- arguments begin to involve self-esteem and/or personal image
- members begin to use personal or coalition-related pronouns, rather than group pronouns
- members can't remember the original issue or how it relates to the current topic
- members find themselves thinking more about people, positions, and strategy instead of problems and solutions.

In general, conflicts confront existing power relationships in the organizational group. Usually, organizational groups that experience conflict perceive inequality among members (which occurs frequently when organizational groups have supervisors, middle managers, and employees), and are sometimes dissatisfied with the group experience itself. However, conflict can be a healthy, positive asset to the organizational group.

Types of Conflict

Conflict usually occurs in two forms: argumentativeness and verbal aggression (Infante, 1987). One has a positive effect on the group, and one has a negative effect. Because argumentativeness involves task-oriented conflict, and verbal aggression involves relational conflict, it's not surprising that verbal aggression tends to escalate, and is more destructive.

Argumentativeness. Argumentativeness is a healthy and beneficial form of organizational group conflict. This is not what middle managers think of when they hear the term "conflict." Organizational members are argumentative when they defend their position on an issue, while refuting others' positions. Remember, arguing about *issues* is vital in organizational decision making. Argumentativeness doesn't affect middle manager satisfaction with personal relationships, but it does affect how other organizational group members perceive the middle manager. As a result, organizational group members will perceive the middle manager as interested, confident, skilled, and dynamic. Therefore, argumentativeness is advantageous to the organizational group and to each individual member.

Verbal Aggression. Verbal aggression is defined as criticizing someone else's *self-concept*. There are several types of verbally aggressive messages that are designed to hurt others: [a] character attacks, [b] competence attacks, [c] background attacks, [d] physical appearance, [e] teasing, and [f] nonverbal emblems. All of these types of verbal aggression are designed to

hurt *people*, not their ideas. When argumentativeness becomes verbal aggression, conflict becomes destructive to the individual, the group, and the organization. Verbal aggression leaves organizational group members feeling hurt and angry -- feelings that are difficult to overcome.

Organizational members become verbally aggressive for various reasons. They might be angry, be in a bad mood, have dislike for the other members, or they might want to appear mean or tough or funny. However, a common reason why organizational group members use verbal aggression is that they are not skilled at being argumentative. Sometimes organizational members cannot think of anything to say in response to argumentative statements, so they resort to verbal aggression. In short, remember that argumentativeness in the organizational group is healthy and beneficial, and that verbal aggressiveness is extremely destructive.

Managing Destructive Conflict

There are two basic types of destructive conflict situations in organizational groups; those that involve a person and those that don't. That is, sometimes a particular member is the sender or object of a personal attack, and other times they are observers in the conflict. Several strategies can be used by the middle manager when a personal attack is perceived from another organizational member. These strategies are also helpful when criticizing others within an organizational group.

Avoid Verbal Aggression. First, members need to stay argumentative, and refrain from being verbally aggressive as a communication response will only make matters worse. There are several additional ways to reduce levels of threat and defensiveness within the organizational group (Gibb, 1961).

Use Descriptive Language. One way to reduce levels of threats and defensiveness is to use descriptive "I" language, not "evaluative" you language. Don't judge or attack other group members. Instead *describe* what you perceive, and/or how you feel. Descriptive language is less judgmental and threatening than evaluative language, and is likely to receive a kinder response.

Be Problem-Oriented. Another way to reduce threat and defensiveness is to be problem-oriented, not control-oriented. Problem-oriented means focusing on the issue or problem facing the organizational group. If a member is control oriented, they are seeking to run the organizational group at the expense of working the group through the problem to reach a solution or make a decision. Members who have to have things their way create a defensive group climate. It is important that organizational members maintain an attitude of equality, not superiority.

Request Additional Information. When a middle manager perceives conflict from other group members, she or he should request more information. Often, personal attacks are vague. If the accuser won't explain what caused the attack, the middle manager needs to ask questions to get the information. The middle

manager can paraphrase the accuser's criticism in order to clarify the accusation.

Agree With the Truth. Members need to agree with the truth, even if the truth hurts. Middle managers need to maintain an open mind to the person who is attacking. We are conditioned to resist personal criticism, so this is difficult. However, all or part of an attack may be true. Finally, members can always agree with the other member's perception of the truth.

These strategies will help the middle manager relieve potentially volatile situations when members are the object of personal attacks. Mid-managers need to practice these techniques in all of their communication to reduce the potential impact of any destructive conflict.

Managing Conflict

Conflict is sometimes vicious and even violent. If it is, it can lead to the destruction of work relationships and personal friendships. When organizational members entering a conflict believe the best solution is the one in which someone wins and someone loses, the potential for destruction exists. Negotiation has been noted as a dominant communication strategy used to exert power and control over others and forcing some kind of agreement. If one member wins, someone must lose, and the one member will do anything to force a victory and a loss for the other person. In

organizations, conflicts arise over space allocations, equipment budgets, manpower, operating funds, capital funds, resources, staffs, services and the like become the setting where organizational groups and individuals seek to achieve specific goals (sometimes in conflict). Conflict strategies should be able to produce the necessary results for both groups or individuals involved.

To get started in managing conflict, the middle manager needs to know her or his personal conflict style. The manager's personal attitude about self-oriented vs. relationship-oriented behaviors set a standard for how conflict will be managed in the organization (Koehler, et al., 1981).

Tough Battler. The tough battler defends the proposal firmly. This person is characterized by an unwillingness to cooperate toward a solution benefitting all parties. Tough battlers who face tough battlers, reach a stalemate approximately 80% of the time because no one wants to budge.

Problem Solver. The problem solver is willing to listen to others and work toward an agreement that aids in the attainment of goals for everyone involved. The problem solver will reach a quick agreement when trying to manage conflict.

Friendly Helper. The group member who assumes this role is eager to help the other side. The friendly helper helps build relationships, but does not solve problems effectively or efficiently. A friendly helper who faces another friendly helper also reaches a stalemate approximately 80% of the time. A

friendly helper who faces a tough battler loses approximately 90% of the time when attempting to manage conflict.

A problem solving team reaches agreement more often, more quickly, and in the best interest of everyone. Having the mid-manager identify their personal conflict management style helps. It is important that they (mid-managers) know their personal style and that that style will be different in the workplace.

Types of Conflict Management Styles

Adler (1992) presented four primary styles of negotiation. Each style is identified by the behaviors exhibited during the conflict management process and the outcomes achieved. The four styles are:

- Bargaining
- Lose-Lose
- Compromises
- Win-Win

Bargaining

Bargaining occurs when organizational members have extreme differing views on issues. There is little opportunity for resolving the conflict without resulting in a win-lose proposition. There may be power struggles because one side in an organizational group tries to dominate the other. The never-

changing resolve of the member to win is, at best, a victory and a loss. If organizational group members are unwilling to compromise and work through issues and conflicts, hard feelings are likely to persist.

Approaching conflict in an adversarial bargaining style frequently results in one side winning over the other. Even when the a member wins, they still lose because unhappy settlements cause continued dissention. If a middle manager adopts this style, they need to understand that what they gained may be what they have lost. O'Hair and Friedrich (1992) offer some guidelines to avoid tough bargaining sessions:

- Opening strategies should include reasonable and cooperative messages. They set the tone for the serious needs, but not inflexible guidelines.
- Opening bids are higher than the actual "wants" to show how the individual values the proposal.
- Use cooperation and getting along as a means to eliminate roadblocks to communication.
- If the middle manager really believes someone is trying to take advantage of them, similar tactics need to be introduced.
- Remain enthusiastic. The middle manager's enthusiasm shows commitment toward cooperation.
- Rely on different information to maintain a strong position. The middle manager should be prepared to use

different information about the problem to support their side.

- Threats or ultimatums are useless because they result in resentment from others.
- The middle manager needs to remain calm, courteous, and professional.
- The middle manager needs to acknowledge everyone's abilities as equals. No one in the organizational group is better than the other by way of power of position.
- Use effective critical thinking skills to better understand and evaluate what is occurring.

Lose-Lose

In a lose-lose situation, group members refuse to give ground as a means toward reaching an agreement. Remember the tough battler? Imagine the battler who is willing to enter a lose-lose strategic style. No one wins because no one is willing to lose, even a little. Results become ego attached; where winning at the expense of others is the goal. Because lose-lose orientations imply us *versus* them, there is little opportunity to establish strong communication relationships. Strategies involving self-centered behaviors seek total victory outcomes. While no one wants achieve a lose-lose outcome, it becomes inevitable if no one attempts to make an effort to establish relationship-oriented strategies.

Compromises

Compromises may be viewed as a loss because of what members give up to reach compromises. The middle manager didn't get everything she or he wanted and it always seems as though he or she lost some of what was wanted in the process. In reality, someone can't give up something they never really had. Compromises usually occur when all sides realize the overall agreement will not suffer as a result of giving in, at least a little bit.

Win-Win

The ideal outcome in managing conflict occurs when everyone leaves satisfied, content with the results, and willing to continue working together. Win-win outcomes occur where the needs of different members aren't compatible, just different. There is a commitment toward problem solving roles and the identification of member's needs and to satisfy them. Win-win approaches are predicated on the fact that everyone is perceived as having the power to fight, but the preference to cooperate (Koehler, 1982). Win-win styles are possible through consensus and integrative decision making methods.

Consensus occurs when a decision, which is unacceptable to anyone, but group members are satisfied with, occurs. Members place emphasis on eliminating problems, rather than harming others involved in the process. Integrative decision making methods involve identifying the needs and values of each member

and searching for alternatives and the selection of the best alternatives. The six-step process incorporating the integrative methods seeks to make possible the win-win outcome (Koehler, 1981).

When the middle manager uses the following steps, the means toward achieving workable and cooperative goals becomes evident:

- Review and adjust relational conditions. The middle manager must review the reasons for disagreement and then identify surrounding conditions. Oftentimes a quick solution is possible because everyone adjusts to accommodate more workable solutions.
- Review and adjust perceptions. When the middle manager tests the reality of the perceptions about the goals and objectives of others, and their willingness to cooperate, she or he can de-escalate the problem.
- Review the attitudes of the opposition. If the middle manager makes faulty judgments or creates distorted views about the other's intentions, only delays reaching mutually acceptable goals results.
- Define the problem. The middle manager must accept the goals of others. Problems cannot be solved until a solution that is acceptable to both sides can be reached. Oftentimes, most conflicts are arguments over two opposing solutions. However, there may be one solution agreeable to all sides.

- Searching for solutions. The middle manager needs to assume responsible for gathering as many solutions as possible without judging or evaluating them. This helps generate ideas to identify the best solution. Brainstorming helps arrive at quality decisions rather than a quantity of decisions that may not be acceptable.
- Deciding by consensus. The evaluation and consensus decision making strategy suggests that when groups evaluate possible solutions and arrive at consensus decisions, everyone has an understanding and commitment to implementing the final agreement.

Using the win-win approach instills cooperation rather than competition. All members become goal-oriented. Members work toward a mutually acceptable and agreeable method to arrive at a solution that members believe is in their best interest.

Unfortunately, no one style can meet the needs of all members or work in all situations. Often, the entire conflict management process to gain an advantage that the other member is such an important goal that all member's needs and issues are overlooked. Because members spend so much time and energy in conflict over positions, agreement becomes less likely. Fisher and Ury (1981) reveal how bargaining over positions can create problems.

First, a member's ego becomes identified with a position. Members are so concerned about saving face over issues that they

will not give in to develop a working agreement.

Second, the more extreme a member's position is, the smaller the concessions they will make. If an organizational group starts at extreme points, it takes time to get to the middle ground where issues can be resolved.

Third, a contest of who is stronger shatters the communication relationship. If organizational group members push one another to force an issue, little chance to communicate effectively during the discussion is possible.

Fourth, the more members involved in the negotiation, the more likely the conflict will grow. Each organizational group member carries a personal goal aside from the overall goals of the group or organization. Dissention runs high when members attach a symbolic need to win the issue.

Changing the Conflict Management Style

When organizational group members conflict over positions, the middle manager needs to become a soft or hard bargainer. Much like the win-lose, the tough style is us *vs.* you where dominant *vs.* submissive communication tactics are used. The friend *vs.* adversary roles are prominent and the need to gain a victory at the bargaining table becomes the goal. Most organizational members are tired of this strategy. According to Fisher and Ury (1981), there is another option. If organizational group members don't want to bargain in any of these ways, it is important for

the middle manger to change the way the conflict management session is being conducted. Fisher and Ury (1981) focused on the following areas:

- People
- Interests
- Options
- Criteria

People

Group members become emotional during conflict. Tensions exist and feelings are hurt. When this happens egos are shattered. The first goal of Fisher and Ury's technique is to disentangle members from the problem. It is important to deal with the issues, not with the members who set the issues, not their personalities, their personal goals, or their egos. Middle managers need to focus on dealing with the problems that need to be solved and the conflicts that can be eliminated.

Interests

The focus in this area is on each member of the organizational group. What will be in each member's best interest? Can the agreement satisfy some of each member's needs? Can the conflict be resolved in the best manner possible for both sides to continue working together in the future?

Options

The middle manager needs to find a number of solutions working together with the organizational group before deciding on one. The middle manager needs to think about what will work, can work, and might work given the options available. The middle manager needs to resist the temptation to lock into one solution without considering alternatives.

Criteria

The middle manager needs to set up fair standards to show that the agreed upon option will work, can work, and does work. Is the option reasonable? Is the middle manager asking too much from other group members and too little of him or herself to make an option possible?

When organizational groups consider these four factors when attempting to manage conflict, clear concise ideas about the problem and the solutions emerge. Using the following guidelines will help the middle manager set the stage for managing conflict effectively:

- *Analysis* - gather the necessary information for each of the four areas; think about each area and the need to understand: who the members are, what their interests are, what might work for them, and what standard of agreement can we come to?

- *Planning* - the group needs to generate ideas about what to do regarding each area; how will the group eliminate the people and their self-interests and deal with the problem and the solutions? The middle manager needs to do her or his homework. What background information will help to plan for a better negotiation?
- *Discussion* - organizational group members actually sit down and discuss available options and the criteria that will satisfy the need of each member; the key is to discuss, not fight, not manipulate, not overpower others; the middle manager needs to talk with all members about what they want, what they need, and what it will take to help achieve some common ground in the organizational group.

Conclusion

Now is the time for the middle manager to work on managing conflict. The middle manager needs to discuss perceptions from steps one and two before moving to step 3. The middle manager needs to determine how accurate these perceptions of other members are, and eliminate the areas in which there is an inaccurate perception of other members' needs, wants, goals, and go directly to discussion. Using Fisher and Ury's techniques does not mean the other side will not adopt the same techniques. What if some group members do not wish to participate in this setting?

Fisher and Ury suggest the middle manager move the conflict management session toward a discussion of each of the areas and continue to strive toward working this way until everyone decides to participate in a positive goal-oriented manner. If group members try to lock the middle manager into a position, he or she should refuse to move into one. Conflict management cannot occur if the middle manager does not participate. The middle manager needs to avoid being put in the middle by simply refusing to react. Organizational group members need to agree not to conflict over positions. If the middle manager takes a position, she or he will likely battle for it during the whole group process. The point is the middle manager does not want to battle at all. The middle manager wants what is best for the PEOPLE, their INTERESTS, within the OPTIONS available, and fair CRITERIA that will satisfy those options.

When pressure is places on the middle manager to react, she or he needs to be prepared not to react. Self-awareness ahead of time how far the middle manager can be pushed, to what extent the middle manager is willing to move his or her position is important. The middle manager should know her or his BANTA -- *"Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement"* (Fisher and Ury, 1981). The middle manager needs to know the standard against which any proposed resolution should be measured. If the middle manager has not thought carefully about what he or she will do if an agreement cannot be reached, the middle manager is participating in this conflict management situation with their

eyes closed. In order for the middle manager to know her or his BANTA, they need to answer the following questions:

- What will I do if no agreement is reached?
- What options do I have?
- What action can I take?
- Of the options available or suggested, which are workable?
- If I can select one option, which seems the best?

If the middle manager performs these tasks ahead of time, they are more prepared to manage the conflict more effectively for the organizational group. If the middle manager knows what techniques to use, the communication styles to incorporate, and the outcomes desired, helps the organizational group resolve the conflict in the most positive manner. Finally, the middle manager needs to ask:

- What am I willing to accept by way of an agreement or resolution to the conflict?
- What is within the realm of possibility for me and the group to accept?
- What will provide me with a well-devised way to resolve the conflict in this organizational group?

If the middle manager practices these skills in organizational groups consisting of upper management, middle management, and employees, we believe she or he will be better prepared to meet the organizational needs of the future.

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